CONTEMPLATION AND WORLD ORDER

BY THOMAS BERRY, C.P.

If contemplation is to lead an individual to a personal transforming experience of the divine, this can be accomplished in a great diversity of spiritual disciplines. There is no need to advert to the condition of the world, whatever it is. The less attention to the world, the better. But if contemplation is to advance the peace and order of the world in some direct manner, it requires more careful consideration of just what is dysfunctional in the world and how this can be remedied. For this reason we here present a few observations on the present disorder, its remedy, and how contemplation contributes to this remedy.
Now we see that the human life system is integral to the total set of life systems, that the world order is truly the world order, that humankind must accept its role and submit to the dominance of the whole, instead of trying to be a part over the whole.

THE GREAT SCISM

The disorder of our times is largely rooted in the schism between the secular scientific society and the spiritual religious society. Any adequate remedy for our troubled world requires the healing of this schism and the establishment of a vital presence of the secular and the religious to each other so that meaning and direction can be given to the human process and the psychic energies needed can be evoked from the available resources.

It is regrettable that with all our meditation and all our spiritual efforts at understanding, we have in the recent past made so little advance toward a functional human order. Although there have been religious involvements in the social, economic and political dynamics of our times, these have had only limited impact because the religious society is fundamentally redemption oriented while the surrounding society is creation oriented.

This situation has existed since the 14th Century, when the Black Death decimated Europe. Western religious persons became preoccupied with redemption outside the world rather than with transformation of the world. The world was seen in an unfavorable light. What devotion we have to the world is mainly of the redemptive type. We lack a cosmology, an effective creation story, an understanding of the dynamics of history, an emotional response to the world as such.

The world about us seeks solutions to its ills by a scientific understanding of how the world came into being, how it functions, and how it can be made more effective in supplying the basic needs of people. It is preoccupied with cosmology and its extension in history and technology. It is in quest of a comprehensive story of the cosmic/earth/human process. Little can be done for the world except in the context of this vision.

Awareness of the cosmic/earth/human process whereby all things have a genetic relationship with each other is the most significant intellectual achievement of humankind since the higher civilizations came into being some 2500 years ago.

In the 19th Century the sequence from simpler to more complex forms of life was discovered. This led to an understanding of the physical evolution of the earth, which in turn led to an understanding of the evolution of the entire complex of galactic systems. The whole was seen as a physical process brought about by random processes.

We thus have two orthodoxies confronting each other: the scientific orthodoxy maintaining that the emergence of the universe, of the earth, of life, of the human race is something physical, determined by random processes, and the religious orthodoxy that is so stunned by the new vision of the evolving world that it has retreated deeper into its own traditional ways of experiencing the universe.

In consequence of these two orthodoxies, human affairs, even the earth itself, is caught in a vortex of ill-directed activity that threatens to end in self-destruction. The secular scientific world is seeking its salvation in an increasing manipulation of the natural world and in the exploitation of the energies stored in the fossil fuels of the earth and in the nuclear structure of matter. This manipulative process is inherently inflationary since it exhausts energies that cannot be replaced. In the case of nuclear energy, the most deadly toxic forces known to man are introduced into the air, the earth and the sea.

FROM SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY TO SPIRITUAL INSIGHT

Yet in spite of its present inadequacies, the story of the universe that has emerged from scientific inquiry is the most profound revelatory experience of humankind since the great religions were born. In its corrected version, this story constitutes the basic hope for a viable future for the human community and for the planet earth. This picture of creation, without the destructive technologies associated with its development, is the only functional view of the universe that is presently available to us.

This new cosmological myth is being taught throughout the world to all the children of the human community who are involved in formal education in its modern mode. The difficulty of this myth is that it is presented merely in its physical aspects; its numinous spiritual aspect is omitted. Thus the story is distorted. But once this myth is given its integral expression as a numinous/physical as well as a mechanistic/physical process, then the human community has a foundation on which to proceed.

World order is a product of the world process. In its human phase world order is a continuation of the cosmic/earth process. The "order" involved is not the order of an abiding image of eternity such as that presented by Plato in the Timaeus but the order of a universe and a human community that is coming into being. This sense that the human order is a continuation and participation in an emerging world process is primary in our discussion. There is not and never has been an established world order. There is only the world genesis: a cosogenesis, biogenesis, anthropogenesis.

Such a process can only be presented as narrative, as story; a story that is being written as it is being acted. The world order has the order of a story, not the order of a geometric pattern. It is of utmost importance for us to know the story sequence as this has brought us to the present situation in which we suddenly find ourselves on stage and in command of the entire production.

This brings us immediately to the question: Who knows the story? Who can provide an understanding of the precise roles we are playing? Who will help us discover our historical identity?

Traditionally the basic orientation to reality in the various societies has been provided by the great religions of humankind. But when we investigate...
these religious traditions we discover that they are mostly metaphysical in their understanding of reality. The story they tell is the interior story of the way toward a spiritual liberating experience, such as we find in the religions of India, or the account of the manner in which humans integrate their activities into the seasonal sequences of the cosmic cycle, as we find in traditional China. Even in the traditional Western world the universe is seen as the image of the divine reality, the Agathon of Plato. The story is the account of a spiritual redemptive process played out within this established context. It is not the story of a developmental universe. The mustard seed that grows into a tree and fills the whole world is filling up an established space.

In opposition to all traditional stories of the universe, the present secular scientific story is a story of the total cosmic process. It is humanity's first complete historical narrative founded in scientific understanding and objective observation. If we are going to deal with our world we must deal with it in a context in which human historical development is seen within a total cosmic process. The forces that existed in the very beginning, in the emergence of the galactic systems some billions of years ago, manifested the same tendencies toward complexity, community, and centration that are now operating in the earth system of which humankind is the most complete expression.

Not only the religious, but also the economic, political, medical, legal and moral dimensions of human society — indeed all aspects of human life — must be considered in this context to have any grounding in reality. It is the integrating myth of contemporary humankind. The standard of value within this myth is not the correspondence of the created image to the divine reality; it is rather the adequacy of humanity in enabling the emerging universe to achieve its higher expression in the increasing intercommunion of beings within an increasing diversification. This has been the main theme of the cosmic/earth process from the beginning. In our times we are witnessing a new phase of reflective consciousness. For the first time we know the process and have extensive control over it.

The history of humanity in the higher civilizations that have emerged since the neolithic period has been the story of people's efforts to identify themselves over against the earth process.

This is especially true of the recent period of technological advance. Humankind represents a new mode of conscious being that rises beyond the capabilities of pre-intellectual nature. Thus the tendency in Western civilization to establish humankind's identity over against the earth process. While this has been an important phase of the earth dialectic, it has also had disastrous consequences in producing ecological and psychic disruptions.

But now this phase is coming to a close. Humans are discovering anew their place within the earth process. They begin to realize that they are not lords of the universe. They depend on the dynamics of the earth to sustain them in their own being and in all their activities. Humans must define themselves primarily in relation to the earth, not primarily in relation to themselves. Humankind is the consciousness of the earth. The earth in this context becomes the primary subject, humankind a mode of earth being. This is the new human situation. But once this adjustment of the center of attribution is established, humankind can then deal with the problem of order.

EXPERIENCING THE REALITY OF SUBJECTIVE COMMUNION

The second consequence of our contemplation should be a functional awareness of the primacy of subjective communion with the world over objective manipulation of the world. One of the great achievements of humanity during the early period of awakened consciousness was its capacity for subjective communion with the totality of things and with each particular thing. Each fragment of matter had its own subjectivity, its own interiority, its own spirit presence. It was to this spirit presence that humans addressed themselves. So with the trees and flowers, birds and animals, so with the wind and sea and the stars, so with the sun and the moon. In all things there was a self, a subjectivity, a center; humans communed with this center with a profound intimacy.

That contemplation whereby humans sink deep into the subjectivity of their own beings is a primary way of experiencing the totality of things and of so constituting a truly functional world order. This is the order of interior communion, not the order of external manipulation or compulsion. Each aspect of reality is discovered in a mutual in-dwelling which is the supreme art of life. Nothing can be itself without being in communion with everything else, nor can anything truly be the other without first acquiring a capacity for interior presence to itself. These come together in some mysterious way. Thus the deepening of the personal center becomes the deepening of the capacity for communion. Since all things grav-
The deepening of the personal center becomes the deepening of the capacity for communion. Since all things gravitate toward each other, a person only has to permit the inner movements of his own being to establish his universal presence to all the earth.

This attraction of things to each other is the fulfillment at the spiritual human level of the attraction of gravitation at the physical level. Through this mysterious force of attraction, the least particle of matter attracts and is attracted to every other particle of matter even though it is at the far edge of a distant galactic system. The volume of each atom is the volume of the universe if we consider that a thing is where its power is felt.

Based on this principle the various nations of the world and the various classes of peoples within nations must establish a new paradigm of human relationships. This is especially urgent in a period of advanced communications technology. The bonds of exterior communion have bound humankind together in new ways which require a new capacity for subjective communion. That there exists an inherent capacity for this is evidenced by the total process of the universe. This capacity for inter-subjective communion needs to be presented in a compelling cosmic-historical context to show that it arises not out of some religious belief or out of a salvation mystique but out of the very dynamics of reality itself. To understand this both intellectually and emotionally is the basic work of contemplation that would lead humankind to fulfill the next phase of the cosmic story.

**ABSORBING THE CREATIVE ENERGY OF THE COSMOS**

A third aspect of the type of contemplation I am suggesting would be the absorption of the new energies that are available to humans in the psychic order from their contact with the cosmic/historical process. Almost limitless cosmic power belongs to each of us if only we will absorb it. This was done in earlier ages by tribal peoples when in times of crisis they painted the various cosmic symbols on their bodies or decorated themselves with the symbols of the universe: the sun and moon and stars, wind and lightning, the flora and fauna, even the rocks of the earth. They thus absorbed the powers of the earth — both the physical and the psychic — into their own being.

Examples of this phenomenon can be found in classical literature. Neither Achilles, the mighty Greek warrior of the Homeric epic, nor Aeneas, Vergil's hero, would go into battle until he felt sure that the total cosmic order was functioning within himself.

So too with historical power. Historical transformations have had cataclysmic moments, but in each case something stupendous has emerged in proportion to the devastation wreaked. Neither in the earth nor in the individual nor in human history is life development simply a gradual, ordered process of change; it is rather a sequence of crises or upheavals, even of periods of extensive disorder.

An appreciation of this in our understanding of the life process of the human community is indeed difficult. Our rejection of disorder and our preoccupation with order may be our most potent source of disorder. What is needed is not primarily order but a process of creative tension. The inability to understand the creative function of disorder is a supreme evil. It leads to a type of paralysis when severe disorder is experienced. Rather than being an energizing, creative stimulus it leads to enervation and desperation. It incapacitates a person or a society for incorporating a needed polarity into the thinking process.

The primary need then is to think not of world order but of world creativity. It is precisely because we reject disorder with such vehemence that we are not creating more extensively at the present time. We might understand this better if we consider that there are two forms of advance in the unfolding of reality: the first is the advance within an established paradigm of what is desirable; the second is a movement from one paradigm to another. A change of paradigm took place when Western society moved from the artistic norms of Romanesque architecture to the norms of Gothic architecture. Within each of these there were successive stages of development. But there came a time when it was appropriate that the paradigm be changed.

Other instances could be given. At one time knighthood fulfilled a vital function in Western society. But gradually society changed and knighthood became an artificial pose. So with other phases of life. The time comes when the paradigm needs to be changed. No amount of improvement within the paradigm will provide a satisfactory response to the situation.

The difficulty is that of transition. Transition periods are chaotic periods. The new ordering principle emerges only over a period of time. To seek the new ordering principle by clinging to a past paradigm of order is to frustrate its emergence. What is needed is a willingness to grope toward the new even when the new cannot be clearly understood.

**CREATION MYSTIQUE: A STORY FOR OUR TIME**

Such is the function of contemplation at the present time. We are in a period of groping. We do not know exactly what we are groping toward. We are in a situation similar to that of a musician who is haunted by an unheard melody that he cannot identify until it emerges in his mind. He simply knows that he will recognize the melody when it appears. So in scientific discovery. So in all phases of invention or creativity. So in the present.

We do not know exactly what type of order is now possible for us, we do not know its exact shape, or perhaps even its immediate governing principle. It is a demonic as well as a divine moment. A sense of total realism is needed to penetrate into the deeper significance of the moment and to guide the transformation that is taking place. There are temptations to flee into an ephemeral futurism, a sterile traditionalism, or to remain indecisive in the present.

continued on page 48
SUMMARY

The evangelistic task today is to confront ourselves with the Christian conviction that God establishes justice as the basis on which we are to live out our individual and corporate lives; that we have acted unjustly so that injustice pervades the earth; that God has not abandoned us but continues to present us with new possibilities. The true evangelist both proclaims this Gospel and lives it, knowing that it has the power to sustain, to renew and to transform. In a world torn by strife and suffering, the evangelist is a herald both of judgment and hope.

The writer of the book of Deuteronomy, after reminding the Israelites that if they worship gods other than Jehovah, they will perish, stated:
Therefore, let us choose life that we and our seed may live by obeying his voice and cleaving to him, for he is our life and our prosperity. (Deut. 30:19-20)

He might say the same to us today. Let us choose life that we and our seed may live also. Amen.

BERRY (con’t)

These lead to destructive revolutionary movements, to traditional fixations, or to pure negativism. Often these are the consequences of partial views of the situation. They represent problem-solving attempts within an inadequate paradigm of how the earth/human process takes place. The primary need is not for problem-solving techniques but for a new paradigm that goes much deeper and changes things more completely than what has been generally suggested.

My own feeling is that most of the attitudes so far adopted and most of the solutions so far proposed remain within the Christian redemptive mystique. I am suggesting that the single greatest change needed is a rather complete change to a creation mystique, and that this creation mystique is provided by an adapted version of the new cosmological myth that is the story side of the modern scientific view of the universe and the forces governing its unfolding reality. This is the musical theme that is haunting the minds of modern people. It is the half-heard song that could awaken us to the type of activity that would integrate the new world order.

The greatest obstacle to our awakening to a full consciousness of this new dynamic of history is probably to be found in the neofundamentalism that presently dominates a large part of our thinking and acting. Because of this neofundamentalism much of the effort being expended by Christians is, I think, leading to deeper frustration. But it is not only the neofundamentalism of Christians that is involved. We live in a world of neofundamentalism: Buddhist, Hindu, Sufi, Yogic and many others. This may be a final assertion of the power of these ancient traditions. But each of these must not only lead to transtemporal experience, each of these must function within infratemporal history.

For the Christian there is an overwhelming feeling for the redemptive emphasis and little responsiveness to cosmology or creation processes. Christian peoples generally have savior fixations. This is great difficulty. Certainly in our seminars there is nowhere to be found any adequate presentation of the creation process as this is experienced in the present. The courses are on such subjects as soteriology, Christology, ecclesiology, the sacraments, grace, pastoral ministry and other such courses along with a good bit of sociology and psychology. The least understood area is that of the creation dynamics. Thus we have no effective story.

Once we accept the new story in its physical and numerous dimensions we have a basis on which to educate in an integral fashion. When children study earth science and life science they will receive the integral world in which they can experience both the divine and the created, a world in which they must live and function. Not only will the educational program become integral, but the various aspects of the human order—economic and political, artistic and literary, moral and religious—will all derive from a common basis, be invigorated by the same cosmic forces, and move toward the common goal of a complete earth in its highest differentiation and its highest intimacy of the intercommunion of all things.

While this is not a complete set of directives for building the future, it does, I hope, indicate a basic stance that needs to be taken, a position from which we can begin the task in some comprehensive way. It outlines the type of contemplation that religious communities can share with the total society. The religious society will not continue to be an isolated life system victimized by entropy but a part of the integral life system on which everything depends.